



Communicating with your toddler when experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges



A toddler can notice even subtle changes in mood and behaviour when their parent is experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges.

This resource can help you to connect with your toddler when you are experiencing mental health and/or substance use challenges, so they feel secure and nurtured.

It steps you through:

- Recognising your feelings and behaviours
- What your toddler notices and experiences
- Communicating with your toddler to support a nurturing connection

Recognising your feelings and behaviours

By recognising your mental health and/or substance use challenges, you will be more familiar with how it affects your emotions, behaviours, and moods. Emotions, behaviours, and moods affect how you view yourself and how others view you. They also affect your relationships, including with your toddler.

When you are facing any mental health and/or substance use challenges, it is important to be aware of how your thoughts and feelings can influence your behaviour, facial expressions, and tone of voice. These are the changes that will be noticed by your toddler.

The first crucial step is to reflect on the thoughts and feelings you experience and the behaviours your toddler sees and hears. Then consider how your feelings and behaviours could affect the way your toddler feels. It can be helpful to do this activity with a partner, friend, or your health professional. You can also do the activity on your own.



As a parent it can be incredibly challenging to think about how your toddler views what is happening. It may be useful to talk with your health professional or another trusted support person about the impact of your mental health and/or substance use challenges on your role as a parent.

A reflective moment

Try this activity on a day you are feeling well.

Reflect on the thoughts and feelings you experience, as well as the behaviours your toddler may observe.

Consider how these may impact them and tick the symptoms and behaviours from the list below that align with your experience.

- ☐ Talking and moving slowly
 - ☐ Struggling to concentrate
 - ☐ Feeling numb
 - ☐ Worrying a lot
 - ☐ Seeing or hearing things
 - ☐ Very tired
 - ☐ Suspicious thoughts
 - ☐ Low motivation
 - ☐ Sleeping a lot
 - ☐ Traumatic flashbacks
 - ☐ Not mixing with others
 - ☐ Irritable, short-tempered
 - ☐ Sad or teary
 - ☐ Anxious
 - ☐ Angry outbursts
 - ☐ Over-sensitive
 - ☐ Abuse/overuse of alcohol or drugs
 - ☐ Suicidal thoughts
 - ☐ Self-harm
 - ☐ Restless

Are there any additional experiences you would like to add? Please list them below:

Select the five items from the list above that worry you most as a parent and write them underneath the heading 'My feelings and behaviour' below. Then, reflect on what your toddler might see, hear, and feel when observing you, and write your thoughts below 'What does my toddler see, hear and feel?'.

<p>My feelings and behaviour:</p> <p>What does my toddler see, hear, and feel?</p>	<p>My feelings and behaviour:</p> <p>What does my toddler see, hear, and feel?</p>	<p>My feelings and behaviour:</p> <p>What does my toddler see, hear, and feel?</p>
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What your toddler notices and experiences

Although a toddler may still be developing their understanding of what you say, they will be sensitive and responsive to your emotions and to the tone of your voice. Toddlers are very perceptive and can detect even the smallest change in their parents' behaviour and body language (despite a parent trying to 'hide' any change).

You might notice that when you are struggling with your moods and emotions, your toddler's responses may also change. Your toddler may be reacting to behaviours or situations they do not understand. They may need help to manage and name their feelings.

Thinking about the thoughts, feelings, and behaviours you previously listed:

- What might your toddler see in your face?
- What might they hear in the tone of your voice?
- How might they have made sense of this?
- Which of your behaviours might worry your toddler?
- What have you noticed about their reaction?

Helpful tips for connecting and communicating with your toddler

- Let your toddler know using simple language that you are not well, and it is not their job to worry as you are taking steps to get better. For example you could say *"I am not feeling well right now, but it is okay. You don't need to worry because I'm getting the help I need to feel better."*
- If you are not feeling well and your toddler is distressed, try to manage your own feelings first before trying to comfort them. Use a calm voice, gentle facial expressions, and slowly lower your body to be with them.
- Sit quietly and have a cuddle, read a story, or sing a song. If you do not have the energy to sing, listen to music together or just snuggle.
- Start to link words to feelings. If you are feeling irritable, reassure your toddler by saying *"Mummy/Daddy is feeling grumpy/angry right now. It's not because of you. I can see that it's making you sad."*
- You might start a conversation about your mental health and/or substance use challenges with:
"I used an angry voice, but I'm not mad at you. I'll try to use a calm voice next time."
or
"I am not feeling well and need to rest. Let's do something quiet together."
- Use the reflective exercise to help you start conversations with your toddler (use the earlier list to get started).

Some key tips to keep in mind

- Toddlers communicate feelings, frustration, and their need for attention with their behaviour.
- Toddlers need to trust that you can respond to their needs in a calm and positive way.
- Encourage your toddler to use words to express their feelings. For example, *"I can see you are looking sad. Are you feeling sad?"* or *"I can hear you using your angry voice. Are you feeling cross/frustrated?"*
- Spend time with your toddler each day. Plan if you know you will not have a lot of energy. Share stories, read a book, listen to children's music, or play in the sand.
- Although discussions might be short, their meaning is important. Small conversations can build on a shared understanding between you, your toddler or child and family.
- Your toddler needs to know that they have not caused you to be unwell, it is not their fault and that you are taking steps to get well.

Consider talking with grandparents, other family/whānau or good friends. Have a conversation with these people. Share what you've explained to your toddler and what you'd like them to share, along with anything you prefer not to be shared. You can also tell them if there is any information that you do not want to be shared with your toddler.



Communicating with your toddler



Supporting Parents Healthy Children

Te tautoko i ngā mātua me ngā tamariki hauora

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